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Defense Dept. Is Rebuffed on Soviet ABM Threat

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WASHINGTON, March 4 — The White House has rebuffed a Pentagon suggestion that the United States formally assert that the Soviet Union is preparing a nationwide ABM defense, Administration officials said today.

Under the Antiballistic Missile Treaty of 1972, the two sides agreed to limit their ABM systems so that they could not become the basis for a nationwide antimissile defense.

Defense Department officials had proposed that the United States now find the Soviet Union to be moving toward such a defense and that this be noted in the annual report on Soviet adherence to arms treaties. To support its case, the Pentagon cited the start of construction of three new radars on the western periphery of the Soviet Union, among other actions.

Cautious Assessment Is Due

Experts at the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department contested the Pentagon assessment.

Officials said the annual report, which is expected to be made public shortly, would offer a more cautious assessment. The United States has previously said that the Soviet Union "may be" preparing a nationwide defense, and officials said there would be no basic change in that assessment.

They said that intelligence did not provide a strong case for the Pentagon view and that some of the past con-

Past concerns on Soviet were overstated.

cerns, stated in the 1986 report on purported Soviet violations, had been overstated.

For example, they said, the United States had expressed concern about a Soviet practice drill in the reloading of ABM launchers near Moscow. The reloading had been conducted in a matter of hours. The ABM treaty has a provision against "rapid" reloading, without being specific.

Government experts noted that the reloading drill was held in 1983, and has not been repeated since then.

The United States also said last year that the Soviet Union might be trying to improve its SA-12 antiaircraft missile so that it could intercept ballistic missiles. The 1986 report spoke about the interception of a short-range tactical missile, suggesting that the Russians might be able to improve the SA-12 so that it would intercept long-range missiles. Such improvements are prohibited by the ABM treaty.

Today Government experts said the SA-12 had missed most of the time when it was fired at the shorter-range missile.

One expert said, "It hit once in about 20 times."

While the Defense Department has cited the construction of the three new radars in the western part of the Soviet Union as signs that the Russians are building an ABM defense of their territory, other experts said that the radars were intended for early warning of an American attack.

The construction of early-warning radars is allowed by the ABM treaty since they are on the periphery of Soviet territory and oriented outward.

Mobile Radars Were Questioned

In 1986, the United States also voiced concern about the development and deployment of old radars that it considered mobile systems. Mobile components of ABM systems are prohibited by the 1972 treaty.

But earlier this year, Government experts said, the Russians had only four of these old radars and several of them have since been dismantled.

Past reports about Soviet adherence to arms treaties also said the Russians are "likely" to have violated two treaties of the 1970's that limit the size of underground nuclear tests.

Since that charge was first made, the Central Intelligence Agency has lowered its estimates of the size of the nuclear explosions conducted by the Soviet Union. And some experts at the United States nuclear laboratories have questioned the earlier allegation.

A draft of the latest United States report that is soon to be made public says that further study of this question is needed. But the forthcoming report will not withdraw the past allegations.